

White-tailed Deer



This deer is good runner and can reach 36mph. It also is a strong swimmer; the hair shafts are hollow so even when exhausted, the deer will not sink.

Signs:

- Raggedly browsed vegetation; they rip rather than snip because they lack upper incisors
- Buck rubs – polished scars on trees, bushes, or saplings
- Buck scrapes – pawed marks with broken branches; does will urinate in these; bucks will then follow with scent trail
- Bed – shall depression in leaves or snow
- Scat – hard, cylindrical pellets

Deer eat a variety of vegetative foods, from green plants to woody stems, to berries. They eat 5-9lbs daily.

The social network of deer are comprised of does and their young in one group and bucks in the other. They usually stay apart most of the year but will band together in winter. The does and young usually disband when the next fawn is born and the bucks disband before the fall rut.

Antlers, which are very hard bones, begin with 1 spike (called a spikehorn); these are shed each winter. A 3-year-old could

have 8 points but this varies with nutrition they receive and their genetics. Age is determined by teeth wear, not by antler points.

By the mid-1800s, the white-tailed deer were nearly exterminated in the Northeast and the Midwest. Hunting restrictions, which began in 1865 and ended in 1895, along with the decline in wolves and mountain lions, which were their main predators, created an environment for the deer to thrive. By the 1900s, the deer had rebounded.

With the wolves and mountain lions numbers still on the decline, humans exert the only significant control of the numbers of deer. They have a short lifespan – only 2 years – but are prolific breeders. If well-nourished, a doe can breed at 6 months and it's not unusual for older does to have twins or triplets. If they are not hunted and the population is not controlled, malnutrition will set in and they can die of disease, parasites, or starvation.

I'm always amazed at how nonchalant the deer appear in the cold winters. When they molt in the fall, they put on a thick, soft undercoat, which holds in body heat efficiently. When spring rolls around, they will shed this thick growth, replacing it with a more practical summer coat!

Their winter feeding habits have also been something of interest to me. Apparently their stomachs harbor different microorganisms in the winter than in the summer, which means their food of choice during the 2 seasons changes as well. In winter, they "browse," eating tips of small twigs and branches. In summer, they are interested in a variety of plants. Because of this, a deer can starve to death in the winter even when hay, corn, or grain is available.